

IDAHO'S ABRAHAM LINCOLN STATUE

THE OLDEST LINCOLN MONUMENT IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES

Alphonse Pelzer was a German immigrant who came to America in the 19th century and relocated to Salem, Ohio. He established a wood carving business and became a sculptor. Prior to his death in 1904, Pelzer designed a monumental, life-sized statue of Abraham Lincoln as the "Emancipator". Standing six feet four inches tall, seven bronze castings were made between 1898 and 1919 of the statue by the Mullins Manufacturing Corporation.

Around the time of Lincoln's 100th birthday celebration in 1912, the Idaho ladies auxiliary of the Grand Army of the Republic probably began discussing the erection of a memorial to the Sixteenth President. Because Lincoln had created Idaho Territory in 1863 and had been Commander in Chief of the Union Army in which their husbands fought during the Civil War, such a tribute seemed especially fitting here. The Mullins Company was contacted, funds were raised, a local sandstone base was shaped, and a bronze plaque procured. Thus, the first plan for a now existing Lincoln monument in the West was put in motion.

On February 15, 1915, Governor Moses Alexander and other state officials gathered with Civil War veterans and their wives to officially dedicate the sandstone base with a band playing and speeches and flags flying in the background. Apparently the statue, intended for mounting on the base was not yet ready or received. However, the ceremonies went forward with great fanfare. At least six major speeches were given by the politicians and soldiers in attendance. The "big" crowd likely contained several hundred listeners. Idaho Secretary of State George Barker called our monument "the shrine of the nation's political saint."

After the statue arrived later that spring, the G.A.R. Ladies and other patriotic groups held a second ceremony on Monday, July 12, 1915. With "Lincoln the Emancipator" now atop the pedestal, a crowd of citizens gathered once more on the lawn of Soldiers Home off State Street in Boise. American flags covered the statue until the moment of unveiling. The Idaho Review reported:

It was an inspiring moment when the flags fell apart and the kindly and well-known features of the martyr stood revealed. It was little wonder that a cheer went up with many a quaver in the voice and that tears stole down the cheeks of many who, as young men and women, had lived and loved and labored in Lincoln's day.

It was a beautiful sight. The flags were drawn aside by Miss Grace Eagleson and Miss Myrtle McGuffin. Then 37 pretty young girls dressed in white and bearing the national colors, led by Miss Faith Barton representing the state, marched past the statute and as they did so each placed a bouquet of fresh flowers at its base.

While this beautiful ceremony was in progress the National Guard

band rendered patriotic music and the great crowd banked against the hall and scattered over the lawn looked on and cheered.

The statue and base together stand 17 feet tall. When the Old Soldiers Home was torn down in the 1970s, the Lincoln monument was moved to the new Idaho State Veterans Home located in Fort Boise.

Research has shown that Idaho's statue is the oldest existing public monument dedicated to Abraham Lincoln in the Western United States. An earlier one, dating to 1866 in San Francisco, was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake. Statues in Ashland (1915) and Portland, Oregon (1928), Spokane (1930) and Tacoma, Washington (1918), Long Beach (1915), Redlands (1932) Los Angeles (1926) and San Francisco, California (1928), were all dedicated later than our Idaho monument. The other six Pelzer Lincoln statues are located in the states of New Jersey, Michigan (two) Ohio, Pennsylvania and Nebraska.

With the full support of the Idaho Division of Veterans Services, the Lincoln monument will now be moved from a low-visibility location to expand its parking lot. Over nearly a century, the sandstone base has developed cracks which threaten to destroy its corners and efface some of its text. The bronze statue also needs cleaning, refinishing and conservation. The new site, 100 yards in front of the Statehouse, is located in Steunenberg Park at the corner of Capitol Boulevard and Bannock Street. It is a prominent high-visibility location worthy of the oldest Lincoln monument in the West. The roles of school children and veterans in supporting the rededication will be emphasized in the text of a new bronze plaque to be mounted on the East side of the base.